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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors in the college classroom. The digest reviews research on the kinds of behaviors instructors, many of whom are graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), exhibit, and students' reactions to and attitudes about those behaviors. The digest also reviews research on teacher immediacy behaviors, differences in students' attitudes based on their gender and the gender of their instructors, and training methods for GTAs. (RS)

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by Roger Sensenbaugh

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How Effective Communication Can Enhance Teaching at the College Level

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This Digest focuses on verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors in the college classroom. The Digest reviews research on the kinds of behaviors instructors (many of whom are graduate teaching assistants) exhibit, and students' reactions to and attitudes about those behaviors.

Background

For better or worse, in most large colleges and universities graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) teach many of the introductory courses in a wide variety of academic disciplines. Administrators of academic departments which hire the GTAs often assume that the GTAs know both what to teach and how best to teach it. Most GTAs, however, enter graduate school with no teaching experience, and in many universities, they receive only the most cursory teacher training. Investigating how these instructors communicate with students and what students need and expect from the classroom communication environment may help in designing effective training programs and make GTAs and students more aware of the importance of classroom communication behaviors.

Student Perceptions of GTAs

Noting that little is known about how GTAs are perceived and evaluated by students, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Fink (1993) sought to identify factors which influence the degree to which GTAs can meet their students' expectations and to identify those areas where GTA trainer and course directors might focus their energies to best enhance training. In general, undergraduate students indicated no strong preference for regular faculty versus GTAs; they viewed GTAs as being as effective and as deserving of respect as regular faculty. Students perceived GTAs as being somewhat more friendly, more creative, and more accessible.

Teacher Immediacy

According to Butland and Beebe (1992), "teacher immediacy" in the classroom (verbal and nonverbal communication such as smiles, head nods, use of inclusive language, and eye contact) is perhaps the most salient research variable to emerge in instructional communication research in the past two decades. Their research applied implicit communication theory as a paradigm to explain the increased learning that results from an instructor's use of immediate behaviors such as offering praise or feedback on students' work, showing a willingness and interest in talking with students, addressing students by their first names, and employing inclusive pronouns such as "our" class and what "we" must do. Nonverbal immediate behaviors such as displaying vocal expressiveness, smiling, relaxing body posture, and varied gestures and movements also enhanced student learning by increasing students' liking for the instructor primarily and subject matter secondarily.

The interaction of students' motivation to study and instructors' verbal and nonverbal immediacy was investigated by Frymier (1993). Her research found that students beginning the semester with either low or moderate motivation to study had increased motivation to study after being exposed to a highly immediate instructor, while students with a high level of motivation were unaffected by their instructors' immediacy behaviors.

Attitudes of Students and GTAs about Communication Behaviors

In the process of developing a scale for assessing the perceived communication effectiveness of graduate teaching assistants, Daniel (1983a) asked students and GTAs to identify effective communication behaviors. The behaviors were compiled into a scale that was administered to undergraduate students. The findings suggested that students perceived as effective those instructors who possessed (1) organizational stability (answers questions clearly and concisely, explains guidelines, and points out what is important in each lesson); (2) instructional adaptability (shows interest in student opinions); and (3) interpersonal flexibility (does not put students down or interrupt them).

McDowell (1993) investigated the relationships between teaching style and teaching attitude variables, as well as among gender groups, teaching experience groups, and age groups. GTAs from all 32 departments in a midwestern university participated in the research. Results indicated that 50% of the GTAs felt that the personality of the instructor and interpersonal relationships with

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students played significant roles in their teaching. In addition, between 60% and 80% of the GTAs rated friendliness, "communicator image," "impression leaving," attentiveness, and "animated" more positively than other style variables.

The question of whether graduate teaching assistants in speech communication were aware of the affective components of their classroom behavior and of the student responses to them, and whether the instructors' awareness of the affective dimensions of instruction related to the student evaluative responses were examined in O'Hair and Babich (1981). During the last week of a semester, students were administered the Index of Teachers' Affective Communication (ITAC). GTAs examined the ITAC and were asked to predict what the mean student response would be for each of the items on the measure. While most instructors scored well on the ITAC according to their students, many of the GTAs were unable to predict their scores.

Gender Differences

Students' attitudes about their GTAs differ depending on whether the GTA is male or female, and whether the student is male or female. An interpretation of gender differences in McDowell (1993) indicates that males use the lecture method, a dominant and precise style, more than females, while females feel more committed to teaching and are more informal, friendly, and open toward students.

Daniel (1983b) collected data from over 1,000 students and 60 GTAs. Among the conclusions were that female GTAs were rated more heavily on their instructional adaptability and interpersonal inflexibility than were males, and that female students tended to rate instructors more on those same dimensions. Male instructors were rated more on their organizational stability.

The gender specificity of GTAs' language use was examined by Murray (1993). Eight GTAs teaching a basic speech communication course and seven GTAs teaching a basic history course participated. The number of gender-specific examples used by the GTAs were recorded and compared to the gender make-up of each class. The GTAs adapted their examples to the classroom gender majority.

Training Methods

Many guides exist for instructors who want to improve their classroom communication skills. The Speech Communication Association has published a collection of essays concerning GTA supervision and training for their discipline ("Preparing Teaching Assistants for Instructional Roles: Supervising TAs in Communication" edited by Jody D. Nyquist and Donald H. Wulff (1992)). Diamond (1983) focuses on improving lecture skills, including vocal aspects of lecture delivery. Goodwin et al (1983) presents a guide to help instructors improve or reviews their questioning skills.

For a representative sample of material on training GTAs, see the annotated bibliography by Feezel and Venkatagiri (1990).

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